

FINANCIAL TIMES

April 19, 2016 8:26 am

Japan warned over threats to press freedom

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Press freedom in Japan is under serious threat from Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his government, according to a scathing report by a UN official.

After a week-long fact-finding mission, David Kaye, special rapporteur on freedom of expression, pointed to “really worrying” trends on media independence in Japan and urged reform of the country’s broadcasting law.

Mr Kaye’s comments are the first official recognition of fears that Mr Abe is systematically weakening freedom of the press in Asia’s richest democracy and seeking to silence critical voices.

“A significant number of journalists I met feel intense pressure from the government, abetted by management, to conform their reporting to official policy preferences,” Mr Kaye said at a press conference.

“Many claimed to have been sidelined or silenced following indirect pressure from leading politicians,” he said.

Mr Kaye came to Japan after his original visit, scheduled for last December, was cancelled when the government said it could not arrange meetings.

While a UN special rapporteur has no formal powers, finding itself singled out for criticism is highly embarrassing for Japan’s government. Mr Kaye is a law professor at the University of California, Irvine.

Concerns about press freedom in Japan have been growing after Mr Abe appointed Katsuto Momii, an ally, two years ago as chair of public broadcaster NHK; communications minister Sanae Takaichi said she could shut down “politically biased” broadcasters; and a series of journalists known for asking tough questions left their television jobs.

Mr Kaye took Ms Takaichi to task, saying her view was not dictated by the law itself, and that her comments had reasonably been perceived as a threat to restrict the media.

He called for the government to “get itself out of the media-regulation business” by repealing the clause that allows it to determine what is fair and what is biased.

However, Mr Kaye also criticised the country’s media, saying it would easily be able to resist government influence if it stuck together, preserved its own independence and practised self-regulation.

Among Mr Kaye’s other targets for criticism were Japan’s *kisha* clubs — closed groups of reporters that sit inside every government ministry, gaining privileged access to officials and information but self-censoring their reporting in return.

“I think the kisha club system should be abolished,” said Mr Kaye. “They’re a tool to restrict access — they foster a kind of access journalism and undermine investigative journalism. I think they’re a hindrance to media freedom in Japan.”

Mr Kaye said he had heard first-hand reports of newspapers delaying or cancelling the publication of articles and demoting or transferring reporters who wrote articles critical of the government.

He did not confirm allegations of government pressure forcing out some broadcasters but said the cluster of departures was “surprising in an industry in which employees stay with companies for decades”.

Mr Kaye criticised Japan’s new official secrets act as going “further than necessary in protecting information from disclosure”, and said a body that approves school textbooks should be insulated from political interference.

The comments represent Mr Kaye’s preliminary assessment. He will present a full report to the UN’s Human Rights Council next year.

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